

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

Interview with **KAY McGRATH**Conducted by **BETTY KING**

Kay McGrath was active in community and political affairs in DC for many years. In the 1978 campaign, she was part of a unit that wrote position papers and advised Barry on issues. After the election, she worked on planning issues in the office of the Deputy Mayor for Economic Development. Later she served in the Mayor's office doing community relations and ultimately went to the Police Department where she did liaison with the business community.

November 28, 2015

BETTY KING: Today is Saturday, the 28th of November, 2015, in Miami Beach. I am Betty King and I am talking to Kay McGrath.

Kay, when did you move to the District of Columbia?

KAY McGRATH: I think it was 1967. I should have asked my son on the way over here. He would know. We had lived in Maryland when we first came to the area, and then as we got to know the area we moved into the district, into Cleveland Park.

BETTY KING: And when did you meet Marion Barry?

KAY McGRATH: When he was running for school board?

BETTY KING: Which was what—'68, '69?

KAY McGRATH: I don't even know. If you're asking me years, at this age, forget about it.

[Laughter.]

KAY McGRATH: Somebody else will have to know what year it was.

BETTY KING: Did you support him in his run?

KAY McGRATH: Yes. I went to a party in Cleveland Park, was which was always supporting good people for office, at the [home of] Bardyl Tirana, who also had run for school board, and that was the first time I met Marion. He was still in his dashiki days, and he was sitting on the floor with his back against the wall. I remember it very clearly. And he was so clearly aware of issues and people and what they were like and what they needed, that you just knew he was going to do what he said. Yeah, I supported him.

BETTY KING: Had you been involved in politics before that?

KAY McGRATH: Slightly. Much more for national. You know, I was a docent at the Corcoran and we did art for McGovern, and many other smaller causes. I was a member of the Women's National Democratic Club, and I became their political action chair, and then a lot of the women's groups—Women's Equity Action League, and NOW [National Organization for Women]. There was a lot of foment in the community, particularly of women. So, I was basically in those things, and the neighbors would invite me to come to this or that party for somebody, and through that they said, "You really should be on the then Democratic Central Committee." So, I became my precinct chair, sort of overnight.

BETTY KING: All you had to do was volunteer.

KAY McGRATH: All I had to do was say yes and I was in deep trouble.

[Laughter.]

KAY McGRATH: So I was on the Central Committee. Joe Rauh [eminent civil rights and civil liberties lawyer] —

BETTY KING: Oh yeah.

KAY McGRATH: —remember that?

BETTY KING: Great man.

KAY McGRATH: The old days. The real old days. And Bill Macey—Lacey. Bill Lacey. That was a great team. Johnny Wilson.

BETTY KING: Bill Lucy.

KAY McGRATH: Lucy. Lucy.

BETTY KING: I'm going to be interviewing him. He was the secretary-treasurer of AFSCME. [American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees].

KAY McGRATH: Yeah, and Johnny Wilson [Democratic party activist and later member of first DC City Council]. Those days were very, very exciting. Those were the beginning of when we were starting to march for home rule, and we had a group from Cleveland Park, that we called ourselves "The Home Rulers," and we'd march with big yardsticks.

[Laughter.]

KAY McGRATH: It was festive but serious.

BETTY KING: It seems to me that when I met you, which was '75, '76, when we were coming up to the Unity '76 race for the [DC] Democratic State Committee, that you were an ANC [Advisory Neighborhood Commission] commissioner. You had a lot of positions by that time.

KAY McGRATH: Oh yeah. I had also run for the Council before that.

BETTY KING: Oh, for the City Council? Against Polly [Shackleton, first Ward 3 member of DC City Council]?

KAY McGRATH: Yes, against Polly, in a field of five. I came in second to Polly. That was my big claim.

BETTY KING: How many points between you and Polly?

KAY McGRATH: Maybe 1,000. But given that it was a small race, and it was splintered. It really was. Mary Sherburne something [Ward 3 activist] was the other person. Remember her?

BETTY KING: Yes, I do.

KAY McGRATH: She and I were much closer in votes. But that was fun, and it actually convinced me—I'm not a politician. I'm better behind it, behind the person who wants to be out there.

BETTY KING: But you were on the state committee for many years, '76 and beyond.

KAY McGRATH: Yes. But again, it's more in the analytical, where should we go from here, rather than making speeches and telling people yes when I mean no, because I'm not very good at that.

BETTY KING: In '74, the first home rule election, you were running—was that the one you were running against Polly?

KAY McGRATH: It must have been. Yeah, it must have been.

BETTY KING: The first home rule election. I see. Okay. So, you were clearly working for yourself then and not for Marion, when he ran at large.

KAY McGRATH: Yes.

BETTY KING: Did you work for him in '76, when he ran for re-election?

KAY McGRATH: Yes.

BETTY KING: Remember, he got a short straw [when they drew straws to determine who in the first City Council would serve 4 years and who would serve2].

KAY McGRATH: Yeah. And then when he decided to run in '78, by then I had gotten quite swept up in that whole "save the neighborhood" movement, with Citizens for City Living, that was a major threat to tear down all of McLean Gardens [a collection of rental apartment buildings] and make it hotels. Make it like here, Miami—high-rise hotels and hospital and office buildings. It was just insane. And we tried to negotiate with the developers and they wouldn't

even talk to us. So, we organized and we won, although it took 6 years of zoning hearings and busloads of people and newsletters. It was a huge organizing job to keep everybody on board, and then raise money. But we did win, because we had very, very good lawyers living in Cleveland Park [affluent neighborhood of large old homes in Ward 3q]. I mean, why mess around with Cleveland Park? Half the brain power of the country is there.

[Laughter.]

KAY McGRATH: But we did win, and it was through that that the people who were running for mayor took me seriously, which is really kind of funny to me. I was doing what I believed in. I wasn't trying to be a powerhouse, which is ridiculous for me. But [mayoral candidates] Sterling [Tucker, incumbent chair of the City Council] and Walter [Washington, incumbent DC mayor] and everybody, you know, wanted me to work with them. And when Marion asked me I said yes, right away, and he said, "I am so surprised. I thought you'd be with Sterling." And I said, "Well, a lot of people thought that," because, first of all, one of his daughters taught one of my sons, and the other daughter was a classmate of my other son. But I said, "No. When we needed help, you came. The others didn't come. Walter didn't come. Sterling didn't come. You came out to McLean Gardens. You were there for our pep rallies. Fair is fair. You did for us, I'll do for you."

BETTY KING: So you were then co-opted into the small group of people who were organizing the position papers, the white papers, whatever you want to call them.

KAY McGRATH: Right.

BETTY KING: And did you have specific areas?

KAY McGRATH: It was mainly housing and land use, the real concept that the people who build the neighborhood have a right to help determine what that neighborhood will be, that someone can't simply come in and say "we're taking over your neighborhood. Goodbye." And that's really what the land use battles were about. It's not that we were against all development, but to make it so offensive to the existing community that it's no longer theirs, and they made it. I mean, they're the ones who took care of their property, and shopped in the little stores, and they created the golden egg that the developer now wants to take home and eat. So, it was around those issues.

BETTY KING: And then the other people in that mix, as I recall, were Phil Ogilvie, and Jan Eichhorn.

KAY McGRATH: Jan was really the main runner. She really did the heavy lifting. She got all kinds of research on all sorts of issues. And then we'd do a little brainstorming on what made sense for where we were, and knowing the city, knowing the neighborhoods, and knowing what kind of policies would make any sense for us.

BETTY KING: And as I recall, Phil was doing opposition research as well as position research.

KAY McGRATH: I don't know much about that. I think he was but that was a little quieter in those days.

BETTY KING: You don't usually—

KAY McGRATH: In those days that was kind of quiet, so I didn't know—

BETTY KING: But he was, you know, turning over the stones and seeing what wiggled out.

KAY McGRATH: But one of the main things we did, we were eyes and ears. We were out at every meeting that took place anywhere, making notes on what were the issues that were coming up, and certain themes keep coming up. Then we would write up points for Marion. You know, first he had to agree with them, and of course he did, mostly, because they were pretty sane, add his own ideas to them, to create the position papers. And this went on all the time, every meeting. I mean, I don't think there was a citizen meeting or a civic meeting anywhere in the city that somebody from Marion's campaign wasn't in.

BETTY KING: I'm sure. It's always been a hallmark of his—

KAY McGRATH: Absolutely.

BETTY KING: —that he involves as many people as possible. I mean, his transitions were always a huge number of people on committees, talking about whatever area that they were particularly interested in.

KAY McGRATH: That's right. He really was a terrific listener. Of course, if you had the charismatic personality to bring people to him. But even wherever we went, and I think it was in may have been in the general, yes, leading up to the general election I was mainly in Ward 3 with him, because at that point, because of the McLean Gardens thing, I was a valued front person, because people knew me and they trusted me, and I trusted Marion because he had helped us. So, if I got up and introduced him and told them why I was for him, that was extremely helpful, but it also helped me to find out, every time we went out, are people really responding, is this really their issue, and clue Marion in that I think things are changing here. We need to do a little more research, or something's going on.

But the main issues were always the land use, neighborhood preservation, and education, and those are the big voting blocs too, people who cared about Georgetown preservation or schools. That was it. If you recall, it took off from Citizens for City Living for McLean Gardens. Georgetown became very organized. The Wisconsin Avenue Corridor Committee was very big, which went all the way up to the circle at Western Avenue, because each neighborhood woke up to the fact that, wait a minute, my nice little neighborhood might not be mine next week. I better pay attention.

BETTY KING: There was a lot of applying for historic designations.

KAY McGRATH: But people really understood that suddenly this sleepy little Washington, D.C., is waking up, and we welcome it, really, but in reasonable quantity. You can't just wipe it out.

BETTY KING: Of course, I've always loved the fact that that single-story, with parking lot, shopping center at the Cleveland Park Metro station—its historic designation is the oldest Stop & Shop east of the Mississippi.

KAY McGRATH: That's right, and they wanted to make a mess of that too.

BETTY KING: Oh, they did. They wanted to put up a [Mazza] Gallery or something.

KAY McGRATH: Exactly. A big office thing. And we did, originally, sit down with the developers to say, you know, "What is it you want and how can we work together?" And I said, "Well, the neighborhood does not want something here that closes at five o'clock, and then you have a big, dead space here by the Metro." I said, "That's no good. People want to come out of the Metro and pick up their milk and take it home." And we really fought them off on that, but it was not a good use of that property, at that time. And then someone discovered, one of our historian people, that it had been the first.

BETTY KING: The oldest Stop & Shop.

KAY McGRATH: That's right. Thank heavens.

BETTY KING: Which wasn't the point.

KAY McGRATH: Thank heavens.

BETTY KING: Bess and [President] Harry Truman shopped there. It's historic.

[Laughter.]

KAY McGRATH: But thank God, and look at all the life that's around it now.

BETTY KING: Of course. So, we win the primary and go on to win the general election.

KAY McGRATH: And I expected us to win, by the way. I was one of the people who didn't have a doubt. We were going to win.

BETTY KING: I sat in the office and said, you know, we're really going to win this. I knew we were going to win too.

Well, of course, you know, Ivanhoe [Donaldson, Barry's 1978 campaign manager] was such a brilliant strategist.

KAY McGRATH: He was. He was.

BETTY KING: And he told me, a year before. He said we were going to win [Wards] 1, 2, 3, and 6, and we're not going to win 7 and 8, and we will try and do this the best we can in 4 and 5.

KAY McGRATH: I think Sterling [Tucker] was good up in 4 and 5, I think. Wasn't he? I think Sterling was heavy up in 4.

BETTY KING: I'm sure he was. I'm sure he was. But, you know, we pulled it off.

So, the inaugural comes and you come into the administration. Is that not correct? Now didn't you and Anita and I and some others have to wait to come in?

KAY McGRATH: Yes, because we were on the [Democratic] central committee. I mean the state committee.

BETTY KING: The state committee and we had to get John Ray elected [to replace Marion as an at-large member of the City Council].

KAY McGRATH: Oh, yes. Yes. We had to do that. But also, when I came in, I was in the Planning Office, as you know. I was a specialist assistant to the mayor, but I was based in the Planning Office with [Deputy Mayor] Jim Gibson. But I remember, we were also waiting to know whether we had to resign from the state committee. Ivanhoe was looking into it, to see could we stay on it and still serve in the administration.

BETTY KING: There was no question that, in those days, we couldn't stay on.

KAY McGRATH: Well, I didn't actually know.

BETTY KING: But we stayed on because—

KAY McGRATH: We had to help. Right.

BETTY KING: —we had to vote for John Ray—

KAY McGRATH: Because John Ray had helped Marion.

BETTY KING: —to fill Marion's vacancy.

KAY McGRATH: That's right. But I remember coming back from lunch and there was a reporter there from the *Star*—was it the *Washington Star*?

BETTY KING: Yeah, it was still alive then, in '78.

KAY McGRATH: And he was a little pain in the neck. He said, "Are you going to resign from the state committee?" I said, "Well, we're waiting to hear definitively from Ivanhoe if we have to, and then I will do what we're told to do." The next day I see in the paper, "Kay McGrath refused to disclose whether she would resign from the state committee." Yellow journalism—hello?

BETTY KING: It didn't make the front page, however.

KAY McGRATH: No, but he was trying. He was trying to be a big political wheel, whatever.

BETTY KING: Now Jim Gibson was deputy mayor for economic development?

KAY McGRATH: Yeah, and planning.

BETTY KING: And planning came under him.

KAY McGRATH: Yeah.

BETTY KING: And so you were—

KAY McGRATH: I was in his office.

BETTY KING: —in his office, working on planning issues.

KAY McGRATH: Well, what I was really working on was trying to balance what the community groups wanted to happen, against the actual development proposals, to sit with Jim and the others and go over what was on the possible drawing boards and what was the possible political outfall from that, because there were some that were easy—people were going to welcome these kinds of things—and there were others who would say, "This is going to be a big, fat problem for everybody," you know, and you had to figure that out.

BETTY KING: But then, after time, you went to work for the Police Department, did you not?

KAY McGRATH: First I went up to Marion's office itself, as a special assistant, and I was up on his floor.

BETTY KING: Doing what? Land use planning?

KAY McGRATH: No. In that slot I was liaison with, I think, three—this was leading up to the second election. I was liaison with, I think, three agencies, and there I was basically minding, again, what were they coming up with as we approached an election time that might conflict with Marion's goals of winning the election. And there were some. We have to say the timing is not good to do this. But that was very enlightening to watch Marion at work with those agencies and how, boy, a lot of people didn't think he was really hands-on or a manager. He was. I mean, if people came to the table and were sort of wishy-washy or leaving stuff for him to make the decision, he'd kick them out. "You guys are coming here and you don't know the answers? You don't have any answers for me? Get out of here. Come back when you've got answers." It was really something to watch.

BETTY KING: Well, either that or he knew much better what was going on in their departments than they did because he had so many friends at all levels.

KAY McGRATH: Well, he did, and some of the agency heads were not very happy about that.

BETTY KING: No, no.

KAY McGRATH: They didn't want the "special assistants" in their agencies, because that was another door to the mayor.

BETTY KING: But, of course, you know, when we came into office in '79, the only position, as I recall, in the district government that served at the pleasure of the mayor was the city administrator. All the other agency heads were tenured civil servants, left over from the days when the district government was an agency of the federal.

KAY McGRATH: Yeah, it was federal.

BETTY KING: So that's why the deputy mayors were established, so that Carroll Harvey, Jim Gibson, Ivanhoe, and other people, and so forth, were sort of over those agencies and there was a certain amount of elbowing and so forth to encourage people to take early retirement.

KAY McGRATH: Oh, yes. That was difficult.

BETTY KING: Or move someplace else or something.

KAY McGRATH: Yeah. It was in toward the last part of his administration, then I went to Police, when he was pushing out to farther agencies.

BETTY KING: Yeah, because by that time, by the end of the first administration there were a whole bunch of us who served at the pleasure of the mayor, including all of the agency heads.

KAY McGRATH: Mm-hmm.

BETTY KING: You know, as soon as the election was over and he was re-elected, we all had to hand in our letters of resignation.

KAY McGRATH: That's right.

BETTY KING: You know, when he came in there were no letters of resignation on his desk.

KAY McGRATH: He asked me where I wanted to go and I said, "I want to go to the Police," because that was one of the agencies I had worked with, for him, and I said, "They actually get things done. You give them an order, they understand an order—do it." And I enjoyed working with them, and again, I mostly worked with the business community and the police, to help the police get supporting the business community for programs they wanted to run to prevent crime, that kind of thing, and work together with them, and the small business communities—the Georgetown Business Association, the Capitol Hill Business Association—because they had a lot of safety issues, they had street people panhandling issues, which were quasi threatening, let's say, to people, or at least people felt threatened by those presences. So, we worked a lot

with them and the police on how to handle it. It was quite interesting, quite fun. I enjoyed working with the Police.

BETTY KING: I take it that you feel that Marion made a very positive contribution to the district—

KAY McGRATH: Very much so.

BETTY KING: —at a time of significant transition from the old to the new.

KAY McGRATH: He created a spirit of hope, in all the neighborhoods, that we can do this. We are now grown up and we can do this. And it was there. It was at every meeting. It wasn't just the man, personally, "Oh, we love Marion." It was what he gave them, this sense of, "Yeah, we can do these things." That was so different from before. It was just ho-hum, you know, the Feds are in charge of everything so, so what, you know.

[Laughter.]

BETTY KING: Well, he is going to be sadly missed.

KAY McGRATH: Yes.

BETTY KING: Thank you very much for talking to us.

KAY McGRATH: You are very welcome.

BETTY KING: You are going to be part of our oral history.

KAY McGRATH: Ta-da.

BETTY KING: Thank you.